

A black and white photograph of a man with dark hair, looking upwards and to the left. He is wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved sweater with a ribbed collar and cuffs. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows on his face and body. The background is dark and indistinct.

# THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

WHEN CALVIN KLEIN DECIDES WHAT HE  
LIKES, THEN WE KNOW WHAT WE WANT.

by MICKEY STANLEY





*David Sims, Kate Moss, 1993*





*Bruce Weber, Tom Hintnaus, Santorini, 1982*

In 2003, one year after Calvin Klein sold his company to Phillips-Van Heusen for what the *New York Times* reported as \$400 million in cash, he bought himself a castle. But Klein didn't want to be king. "There were eight turrets...I knew I would tear it down," he says, speaking from the \$75 million Southampton, New York, home he built in its place. Unlike its predecessor, Klein's dream home—a contemporary, dark wood and glass marvel right on the Atlantic Ocean—now fits the tastes of anyone with good sense. This house, as with everything he leaves behind, will stand for generations, partially because it's beautiful, but mainly because it's a Calvin Klein.

"I worked on every detail, every little thing," he says. "There wasn't anything that got built that I didn't design or approve of. I asked people to do things that they hadn't done before. In a sense, I was pushing the envelope building the house the way I had with clothes." It's taken Klein more than a decade to design his house in Southampton. He built a fashion empire over half a century. Klein is patient and deliberate and a bit of a perfectionist. In a new, eponymously titled book of photographs and personal essays spanning his life and career—due out in November from Rizzoli—the designer's astonishing body of work is on full, vivid display. Through photos of the brand's ad campaigns and runway shows, a portrait of the man behind the briefs emerges.

Calvin Klein was born in New York City, the son of a first-generation Austrian mother and an immigrant Hungarian father. To put it plainly, Klein grew up a working-class Jew in the Bronx, who as a teenager wore strange clothes that, as he recalls, "looked edgy on me." Edgy in the Bronx in the late 1950s didn't earn you many friends, but Klein had the support of his parents, who emboldened him to pursue the arts. "I was gifted and always in special art classes in public school," he says. "And then I went to a high school called Art and Design. Familiar, yes? Whether it was painting or sculpting or drawing, it was half the day devoted to the arts. I was an artist before I was a designer," Klein continues. "But I didn't think I wanted to be in a studio by myself forever." After high school, he attended New York's Fashion Institute of Technology in pursuit of a career in clothing design. "I always had a curiosity about clothes—men's clothes, women's clothes, women who wore men's clothes like Catherine Hepburn....," he says.

After school, Klein stayed in New York and worked as a stretcher for the coat manufacturer Dan Millstein before striking out on his own in 1967. He formed Calvin Klein Ltd. at just 25 years old, partnering with his longtime friend and business associate, Barry Schwartz. In the early days, the company produced mainly two-piece suits and women's coats. Thanks to some large orders and ads in *The New York Times*, Calvin Klein Ltd. took off, doing \$1 million in sales their first year. His clothes were available at Saks Fifth Avenue and Bergdorf Goodman. Not long after that, the artist in Klein wanted more. He began showing high-end collections of skirts, sweaters, pants, and dresses—all in signature muted colors with hard, modern lines—at New York's Fashion Week. He was subject to equal measures of admiration and envy by his peers (many older) in the industry. A chance encounter soon thereafter turned Klein from an upstart darling into a national news talking point. "It happened at four in the morning at Studio 54," he says. "Someone came up and asked me if I'd be interested in doing jeans. I called my business partner and said, 'You know I met someone last night. I think this could be really

interesting.' So he negotiated a wonderful arrangement for us. Everyone was successful with that collection."

In 1980 a campaign featuring a 15-year-old Brooke Shields was cooked up to launch Klein's jeans, grounded in his belief that "with stretch, you can do practically anything you want." The resulting controversial ad, shot by Richard Avedon, was banned by television networks CBS and ABC. "She was very young at the time, and the words 'You want to know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing.' became an iconic line. And with that, he became an iconic designer line," Klein says. "I never set out to be controversial," he assures me, though that's what happened.

"Early on I saw a photo of Mark Wahlberg," Klein says. "I asked him about his jeans and he had a story about every pair: 'This is first date, this is more than the first date, jeans to just knock around in.' And I thought, perfect. Because I saw them that way, too. Jeans can be very sexy." So in 1992, Klein doubled down, casting Wahlberg in an ad where he embraced a topless 17-year-old Kate Moss. For some, Klein's erotic depictions of young women and men were alarming, but to the designer it was a matter of surrounding himself with the right people for the right job. Few can argue that Brooke Shields, Mark Wahlberg, and Kate Moss were poorly cast. "If you go out looking for controversy, it doesn't work," Klein says. "I just hired the best photographers and art directors, models, makeup artists, and hairstylists."

Many of the photographs in his forthcoming book were shot by Bruce Weber, whom Klein brought on after seeing his images in *GQ*. "I thought it was perfect," Klein remembers. The two would work together for decades, and as the company grew, Klein was less able to attend every shoot—something he suggests Weber may have appreciated. During one particularly fruitful shoot on the Greek island of Santorini, Klein and Weber had it out. "I would say, 'Maybe you should go a little to the left,

# "ONE OF US IS GOING BACK TO NEW YORK, EITHER YOU OR ME."

## ~ CALVIN KLEIN, QUOTING BRUCE WEBER

maybe a little to the right,' and I was doing that all day," Klein remembers. "Bruce came to me and said, 'One of us is going back to New York, either you or me.' And I





*Inez & Vinoodh, (from top) Jessica Miller & Lawrence Chapman, 2002*



**“IF YOU GO OUT  
LOOKING FOR  
CONTROVERSY, IT  
DOESN'T WORK.”**



*Bruce Weber, Carré Otis, San Francisco, 1991*



# “HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO GREECE?”

wrapped my arms around him and hugged him. I just become so passionate when I see something I love.” Klein’s career is marked by an intense work ethic, and that trip produced one of the company’s most memorable images: a muscled pole vaulter wearing only underwear, leaning against a big, white chimney. “It looked like a phallic symbol,” Klein says. The resulting ads were placed around town in bus-stop shelters, to the pleasure and awe of passersby. “The city called me because people were breaking the glass to steal the posters,” he says. “And I said, ‘How much did this glass cost?’ They said, ‘I don’t know, \$100-\$500.’ I said, ‘I’ll pay for it, let them do whatever they want.’”

Klein discovered the pole vaulter while driving down Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. “All of a sudden, I see this guy running, and I stopped the car,” he recalls. “I introduced myself and said, ‘Have you ever been to Greece?’” Klein told him he was shooting a campaign, to which the man replied, “Sure, I’d go on a trip.” Klein has always had a knack for discovering talent, often using unorthodox methods. “I used to go to schools,” he says. “We used to go to Pepperdine [University] and peek into rooms. I’ve never gotten thrown out of a place, but I easily could have.” Magazines all over the world would wait for Calvin Klein’s fashion shows, knowing they’d see models whom they had never seen before. “I didn’t want to use somebody who was very well known,” he says, “because then I would think they just belonged to everyone.”

All throughout his career, Klein was designing to his own tastes, but for the benefit of many. Eventually his ideas “belonged to everyone,” but first they were his. Everything from the fragrances to the campaigns to the runway shows to the jeans to the house in Southampton was made with one client in mind: Calvin Klein. “We were lucky enough that people liked what I liked,” he says, “I know what I want and oftentimes I know best.” ▲



Mario Sorrenti, Kate Moss, Jost Van Dyke, 1993



